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GREEK FOREIGN POLICY AND STRATEGY, 1939-1941

The debate of recent years about the limits placed by geography on Greek foreign policy can be useful in tracing and analyzing defence priorities in a period in which small and vulnerable countries like Greece considered an alliance with a great power anything but compromising to their independence. Great power protection, contemptible though it may sound in this age of unabating or resurgent nationalism, was sought in earnest, in the not very distant past, by governments which were no less nationalistic than their successors today.

In this paper I propose to examine Greek security considerations in the period marked by the outbreak of World War II and the occupation of Greece by the Axis. In that period and throughout the years of General Metaxas's rule I would argue that British support and protection, more than association with the other Balkan states or Italy, was the basic premise of Greece's foreign relations. In this respect Metaxas's policy was more 'traditional' than either his apologists or his critics would be prepared to concede; in the sense that he tried to align Greek foreign policy with that of the great power considered at the time to be predominant in the Mediterranean. In that respect, Metaxas's policy constituted a departure from the position he held in World War I, when he had been identified with those supporting a neutralist or pro-German policy and had been prominent in opposing Greece's association with the war aims of the Entente powers. It is in the light of his 'pro-German' past, as well as in that of the fascist façade of the dictatorship he established in August 1936, that Metaxas's foreign policy has often come to be represented as one differing from that of his predecessors and as a departure from the main premises of traditional Greek foreign relations.

Apologists of Metaxas and his regime, in their effort to present his rule as a healthy departure from the squables and political instability of the years immediately preceding his dictatorship, have tended to emphasize all those features which appeared to differentiate his policy, foreign policy included, from that of previous governments. If 1936 represented a fresh start in the

defences and military organization of the country¹—which was not really the case—so did in foreign relations. The Italian attack on Greece in October 1940 has been a most convenient starting point in assessing the country's policy in the years leading to the attack. Greece had been the victim of unprovoked aggression: Ever since 1936, Greek policy had been correct, neutral, and free from provocative commitments. Anglo-Greek co-operation was subsequent and consequent to the Italian attack.

These assessments of Greek foreign policy and the assumptions on which they rest grew out of both war-time rhetoric and post-war requirements of Greek policy and national claims, to crystalize eventually in a semi-official historiography². Some of these assumptions, especially the assumption that Metaxas followed a policy of neutrality *vis-à-vis* Britain and Germany, can be found disguised even in revisionist studies³; while his 'pro-German' connections have been regularly reproduced in studies sympathetic to the Greek Left⁴.

It is not unlikely that, were he less dependent on King George II and had he more influence in the armed forces, Metaxas might have been tempted to

1. See General Alexander Papagos, *O ellinikos stratos kai i pros polemon proparaskevi tou, 1923-1940* [The Greek army and its war preparedness, 1923-1940] (Athens, 1945). General Papagos was Chief of the General Staff in the years 1936-1941 and Commander-in-Chief during the war against Italy and Germany.

2. The most representative studies of that category are those by General Alexander Papagos, *O polemos tis Ellados, 1940-1941* (Athens, 1945) (Engl. transl. *The Battle of Greece, 1940-1941* [Athens, 1949]); B. P. Papadakis *Diplomatiki istoria tou ellinikou poleμου, 1940-1945* [Diplomatic history of the Greek war, 1940-1945] (Athens, 1956); Greek General Staff, Army History Direction, *Aitia kai aphormai tou Ellino-Italikou poleμου, 1940-1941* [Causes of the Greco-Italian War, 1940-1941] (Athens, 1959). Also representative is a recent selection of papers, published by the Greek Foreign Ministry under the title *Ellinika diplomatika engrapha, 1940-1941* [Greek diplomatic documents, 1940-1941] (Athens, 1980). The basic assumptions and arguments were first put forward by the *Greek White Book* published shortly after the Italian attack under the title *Diplomatika engrapha: I italiki epitthesis kata tis Ellados* [Diplomatic documents: The Italian attack on Greece] (Athens, 1940). The arguments and assumptions were codified in the introduction to an English edition of this collection by Greek Prime Minister Emmanouel Tsouderos, *The Greek White Book: Diplomatic Documents Relating to Italy's Aggression against Greece* (London, New York, and Melbourne, 1942).

3. See for instance Dimitris Kitsikis, *I Ellas tis 4is Augoustou kai ai megalai dynameis* [Greece of the Fourth of August and the great powers] (Athens, 1974).

4. See N. Psiroukis, *O Fasismos kai i 4i Augoustou* [Fascism and the Fourth of August] (Athens, 1974); S. Linardatos, *I exoteriki politiki tis 4is Augoustou* [The Foreign Policy of the Fourth of August Regime] (Athens, 1975); Jon V. Kofas, *Authoritarianism in Greece: The Metaxas Regime* (New York, 1983), 168ff.

pursue a more balanced policy towards Britain and Germany, perhaps not unlike the policy pursued by Turkey in the same period. As it was, his pro-German past was a handicap which blunted whatever desire he might have had to play the German card and make the British take Greece more seriously than they did. Metaxas was not as powerful a ruler as he wished he was or as his enemies and critics believed he was. The armed forces, an important factor in Greek politics ever since World War I⁵, was beyond his control. The royalist officer corps, which had engineered George's return in 1935, became the king's formidable asset in the dual dictatorship. Moreover, the king, although less popular than his father King Constantine, was no doubt less unpopular initially than the dictator, who had never been popular as a political leader for lack of the main attributes of the successful Greek politician. Metaxas lacked a mass party organization, which he could have used to turn the scales in his favour. Also, for all his pro-German reputation, he could not credibly match the king's British connection with a German one. In the first and crucial stages of the dictatorship the king was convincingly projected as the prime mover and one determined to remain such. For King George were the visits to the great European powers, while for the dictator only visits to Balkan capitals. Finally, Metaxas knew that he was not indispensable; and that the politicians, even when deported to barren islands, never left him to feel otherwise⁶.

Popularity and some real power came late—too late perhaps to allow the dictator to attempt to claim a new role in foreign relations. The Italian attack turned all lights on him and won him much deserved fame. The war, however, further circumscribed Metaxas's freedom of action, because it bound Greece closer to Britain's war effort—or so it seemed to both king and dictator. The war against Italy and the consequent need for assistance left little room for manoeuvring. Greece was locked in a deadly struggle, for which the country was not sufficiently prepared. Material assistance could come only from Britain. Of course, Metaxas could very well request German mediation to end the Greco-Italian war; which, anyway, made no sense at all as far as Germany was concerned. As will be seen, however, Metaxas refused to play the German card, when the Germans actually offered to mediate in the war between Greece and Italy in December 1940.

5. See Thanos Veremis, *I epemvaseis tou stratou stin elliniki politiki, 1916-1936* [The interventions of the army in Greek politics, 1916-1936] (Athens, 1977).

6. John S. Koliopoulos, *Greece and the British Connection, 1935-1941* (Oxford, 1977), 71ff.

Concern for his own position, which was not unassailable, and deep suspicion of German no less than Italian designs in the Balkans, which was not unfounded, cannot by themselves explain Metaxas's refusal to limit Greece's British connection. Considerations much more weighty than personal interest or doubt about the outcome of mediation were surely involved in the refusal to turn to Germany. More than anything else, I think, it was Metaxas's 'traditional' view of Greece's foreign relations and particularly relations with the great powers, which explains the decision not to question Greece's attachment to Britain. Greece's torments in World War I had taught Metaxas a lesson: that Greece cannot afford to disregard geography. If fear of a new national rift, perhaps worse and more detrimental to national interests than the division of the country in the previous war, did steel his resolve to reject the Italian ultimatum in October 1940⁷, how much more such concern must have weighed in December after military success, much sacrifice and newly found national unity!

No less weighty a consideration was Metaxas's belief in the need for Anglo-Greek co-operation in time of war and peace. As early as 1936, shortly after succeeding Constantine Demertzis in the government and before assuming dictatorial powers, Metaxas assured the British government that Greece was determined to follow Britain's lead in Mediterranean affairs⁸. He renewed the assurance in December, when he told the British minister in Athens that Greece was "irrevocably and unreservedly devoted to the British connection"⁹. The occasion for these protestations of friendship was the war scare created by the Italian invasion of Ethiopia and the consequent crisis in Anglo-Italian relations. Such protestations also came from King George, who in March 1937, on the occasion of the discussion of a number of outstanding questions, such as the Greek foreign debt and the operation of certain British companies in Greece, conveyed what was in effect a political proposal¹⁰. During the Munich crisis of September 1938, Metaxas again assured the British government that in the event of war Greece

7. Ioannis Metaxas, *To prosopiko tou imerologio* [His personal diary], edit. by Phaidon Vranas, iv (Athens, 1960), 520-526, confidential announcement to the Athens newspapers editors about his decision to reject the Italian ultimatum.

8. P.R.O., F.O. 371/20381, Athens tel. No. 27 Saving, 25 June 1935. See also Simopoulos Papers (Oxford), letter from Metaxas to Charalampos Simopoulos, Greek minister in London, 6 June 1936.

9. P.R.O., F.O. 371/20390, Athens disp. No. 384, 4 Dec. 1936.

10. P.R.O., F.O. 371/21147, confidential letter from the British minister in Athens, 29 Mar. 1937.

would remain benevolently neutral towards Britain, and in no case would she side with Italy. He would define his position no further, until he knew to what extent British forces would protect Greece against an Italian attack¹¹.

Shortly after the Munich crisis Metaxas made a fresh attempt for closer Anglo-Greek relations. In a conversation with the British minister on 3 October, he said that he wanted an alliance with Britain. "We must assume as a plain fact", he told Sir Sydney Waterlow, "that in the event of European war the use of the Greek islands and Greek ports will be an imperative necessity to the British Fleet and Air Arm. If you cannot have this automatically as an ally, you will be obliged to take it, but with complications. It is no good blinking geography. And surely Greece will be a force worth having as an ally, and immediately"¹². Several days later Metaxas handed the minister a memorandum, in which he said that Greece, "faithful to the traditional friendship binding her to Great Britain", observed in the Mediterranean affairs a policy which corresponded to that of Britain, and that he would be prepared "to concert with and to enter into a close contact" with the British government. He further told the minister that he wished to prepare "for the possibility of war between Great Britain and Italy in which Greece would sooner or later be involved"; and that the reason why he wanted an alliance with Britain was that only on that basis could comprehensive defence arrangements be made in concert with Britain, thus avoiding the "mistakes" of the previous war¹³.

Metaxas's offer was briefly considered in London and politely turned down¹⁴. Greece was, indeed, strategically useful to Britain in the event of war in the Mediterranean. Was she, however, vitally necessary? Metaxas, like most Greeks of his generation, did not seem to appreciate this difference. The usefulness of Greece was subject to factors which had little to do with Greek or British wishes. In 1938, before Italian sea and air power was put to the test against a great power, the use, let alone control, of Greek air strips and mainland or island ports was considered by the British problematic. Moreover, the British did not fail to see that they would eventually secure all that Metaxas promised without the obligations of an alliance. In this, of

11. P.R.O., F.O. 371/22362, Athens tels. Nos. 169 and 171, 28 Sept. 1938, and attached F.O. minutes.

12. P.R.O., F.O. 371/22362, Athens tel. No. 177, confidential, 3 Oct. 1938.

13. P.R.O., F.O. 371/22362, Athens tel. No. 196, 15 Oct. 1938, and F.O. 371/22363, Athens tel. No. 200, 16 Oct. 1938.

14. Koliopoulos, *op. cit.*, 90ff.

course, they were quite correct. What they failed to see, however, or to appreciate fully, was the usefulness of such an alliance in turning Greek strategy and war preparations in the direction of the government's foreign policy. The British tended to underestimate the real as well as the potential value of Greece as much as the Greeks tended to overestimate Britain's ability and willingness to come to their assistance, which they, and Metaxas in particular, took for granted. This was also the distance separating Britain's promises of assistance to Greece, on the occasion of the April 1939 guarantee extended to the country, and Greece's expectations, a distance which would never be actually bridged.

On the occasion of the Greco-Italian talks of September 1939, with respect to the pact of friendship between the two countries, which was due to expire that month, Metaxas drastically limited his options when he made the renewal of the pact subject to British approval. The British reply to his enquiry left no room for doubt as to British requirements from Greece. The proposed Greco-Italian agreement had to be phrased in more general terms than the old pact and its provisions should not circumscribe Greece's full liberty of action in the event of war between Britain and Italy. The Italians, although unaware of the precise British conditions conveyed to Metaxas, did assume as much and accepted the indefinite formula of agreement the Greeks proposed¹⁵.

The Greek government has been criticized for evading a friendly gesture from Italy. This evasion, it has been argued, was bound to make the Italians believe that the Greeks had already made binding agreements with the British¹⁶. It seems, however, that the Italians saw the affair as more than a friendly gesture. Ciano had in mind a non-aggression and consultative pact that would bind Greece to Italy and make her virtually an Italian satellite. The agreement with Greece was expected to keep the British out of Greek harbours should Italy go to war. Rapprochement was also expected to promote Italy's influence in the Balkans. Nor did a non-aggression pact with Greece preclude war¹⁷. Finally, it is unlikely that Metaxas had, by this time, any illussions about Italian designs, or that he would be prepared to offend the

15. *Greek White Book*, No. 52; *Documenti Diplomatici Italiani*, 9th series, vol. i, Nos. 456, 546, 648; Emmanuele Grazzi, *Il principio della fine: L'impressione di Grecia* (Rome, 1945), 74-75, 79-80, 90-92.

16. P. N. Pipinelis, *Istoria tis ellinikis exoterikis politikis, 1923-1941* [History of Greek foreign policy, 1923-1941] (Athens, 1948), 294.

17. MacGreggor Knox, *Mussolini Unleashed, 1939-1941: Politics and Strategy in Fascist Italy's Last War* (Cambridge, 1982), 52.

British in order to sooth Italian susceptibilities. He refused to present the British with such problems, and did not waver from his course of co-operation with Britain. No less obliging to the British was Metaxas on the occasion of the Anglo-Greek negotiations for a war trade agreement and a shipping agreement in October 1939 and again in January 1940¹⁸.

The Italian attack on Greece in October 1940 placed the country in a strange position. Greece was now a belligerent, but only against Italy. To the extent that the Italian attack was a pre-emptive strike against a potential British base, the Greco-Italian war was part of the European war, but only indirectly so. Greece was not at war with Germany, nor was she an ally of Britain. Greece was allied to Britain only as long as she fought against Italy. When invited by the British in early November to participate in a meeting of allied governments, which would be held in London as a show of solidarity among the allies fighting the Axis, the Greek government replied that Greece's position different from that of states like Poland, Norway and the Netherlands, and therefore Greek participation was not "appropriate". To British pressure to reconsider his position on the meeting, Metaxas felt obliged to draw the attention of the British to the possible consequences of Greece's participation, namely an attack from Germany. If the British considered that Greece should not refrain from inviting such an attack, he expected them to state that categorically and to be fully aware of the responsibility they were undertaking in common with the Greeks¹⁹.

Germany then no less than Italy and Britain appeared to define Greece's international position and the nature of the war against Italy. More precisely, it was Germany's attitude towards Greece, more than Greece's war effort against Italy and co-operation with Britain, that determined the nature of Greek belligerency. The German factor, which increasingly strained Anglo-Greek relations, revealed a discrepancy between policy and strategic requirements, which an Anglo-Greek alliance might have prevented. These strategic requirements had not moved in line with the pro-British policy of Metaxas, because they were subject to Greece's obligations arising from her Balkan commitments. The war with Italy only strengthened the influence exercised by these requirements and the influence of the military that put them forward.

As far as Germany was concerned, the Italian action against Greece, which from the start had been unwelcome to the German military, was an

18. Koliopoulos, *op. cit.*, 125-31.

19. P.R.O., F.O. 371/24919, Foreign Office telegram to Athens, No. 806, 31 Oct. 1940, and *Greek Diplomatic Documents*, Nos. 19, 20, 38.

extremely inconvenient factor in the light of the plans to attack the Soviet Union in the spring of 1941, because it offered Britain the opportunity to establish herself in Greece and endanger the planned thrust in the East. If the war between Greece and Italy could be brought to an end with as much face saving for Italy as possible, the British would be probably compelled to withdraw their forces from Greek territory, since their presence there could be associated solely with the Italian threat to the security of the country. There is no question that Germany would have been delighted to see an end to that rather irrelevant war in the Balkans; and it was thought reasonable to argue that the explanation for the rejection by Metaxas of the German offer to mediate must be sought in Britain's obvious interest in forestalling such mediation²⁰. Greece had not declared war on Germany and, once Greco-Italian hostilities were brought to an end, she was likely to accept a position that suited Germany. In that case, Britain would have to evacuate Crete and abandon the naval and air bases on the southern Greek mainland and Crete. To ensure that Greece would not conclude a separate peace with Italy the British were even considering the possibility of making the Germans commit an act of aggression against Greece²¹.

Metaxas proved more accommodating than the British expected, without even demanding—as they feared he would—, in return for not concluding a separate peace with Italy under German auspices, specific undertakings on assistance to Greece, or territorial acquisitions Britain might find impossible to agree to²². The explanation for this attitude, as already suggested, must be sought in Metaxas's unwavering commitment to Greece's British connection, alliance or no alliance. All the same, he was very reluctant to provoke Germany, before the war against Italy was brought to a successful end. It was an attitude that reflected the ambiguous position of Greece *vis-à-vis* the belligerent powers and the self-defeating effort of the Greek government to preserve that position, in the vain hope that the war against Italy would be brought to a successful conclusion, before the weather permitted the Germans to invade the Balkans.

Greek preoccupation with the prosecution of the war against Italy needs

20. Ehrengard Schramm von Thadden, *Griechenland und die Grossmächte im Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Wiesbaden, 1955), 150, 217-18. For the most recent and complete account of the question of German mediation, see M.L. van Creveld, "Prelude to Disaster: The British Decision to Aid Greece, 1940-1941", *Journal of Contemporary History*, ix (1974).

21. P.R.O., F.O. 371/24922, Foreign Office memo., 14 Dec. 1940, and F.O. 371/24921, F.O. minutes, Dec. 1940.

22. *Greek Diplomatic Documents*, No. 61, and Metaxas, *op. cit.*, 546.

little explanation. Greece was fighting for her very existence as an independent state, and that with little British assistance and with even less prospect of securing sufficient assistance from the same source to face Germany as well. Refusal, however, to take concrete measures to meet what appeared to be, by the end of 1940 and the beginning of 1941, a certain German invasion of the Balkans in the spring, could be interpreted as a pretext for doing nothing at all. It was not so much wavering in the expectation of the German onslaught as inaction forced on the Greek leadership by the discrepancy between foreign policy and strategy already mentioned; for which the Greek government was not the only one to blame. The British, ever since Italy had lodged herself in Albania in 1939 and posed a direct threat to Greece, had done very little to bring Greek strategy into line with the country's policy. Metaxas's devotion to Britain was not enough by itself to ensure that Greek policy would be preoccupied less with the war in progress in Albania and more with the expected onslaught from Germany. Like all war fronts, the Albanian front increasingly imposed on the Greek government its own requirements, which no responsible leader could possibly ignore. Pressure, at this crucial juncture, to change Greek war priorities in favour of a front to hold a German attack in Macedonia contributed to a serious divergence of views between the government and the military leadership of Greece, which surfaced after the death of Metaxas and caused much hard feeling to the Greek and British allies.

The Albanian front and its requirements were set apart from the fortunes of the general war by Metaxas in early January, when he asked the British to supply Greece with aircraft and transport vehicles for exclusive use on the Albanian front. Even more determined was Metaxas's effort to safeguard the autonomy of the Greek war against Italy in mid-January, when the British proposed again to anticipate the German advance by sending forces to Salonica, reversing thus all previous strategical considerations and plans of their own military, and Metaxas tried to secure a British commitment to support Greece solely on the Albanian front. On both occasions Metaxas had before him the estimates of the Greek General Staff. Once the Albanian situation was cleared up, large Greek forces would be available to meet the German advance. The position he stated to the British before he died in late January was that Greece, although determined to resist a German attack, would in no case provoke this attack, unless Britain was in a position to make the necessary forces available in Macedonia²³.

23. Metaxas, *op. cit.*, 550.

It was the position one could expect from a small country with scanty resources and faced with the might of a great power. In the case of Greece that position was also influenced by such factors as the country's special relationship with Britain, the form and structure of the ruling regime, the state of the army, the organization of the defences and, above all, the war effort against Italy. The effect of all these factors became apparent under Metaxas's successors, who wavered dangerously under conflicting pressures from the British government and the Greek military. The Anglo-Greek talks of February-March 1941, held to decide in common on how to face the German advance in the Balkans, revealed a serious divergence of views and interests, which everyone concerned tried to minimize for the sake of uninterrupted Anglo-Greek co-operation. The British decision to send troops to Greece, at the earliest possible moment, satisfied the need to make a brave gesture of support to a country publicly guaranteed by Britain, and at the same time made it more likely that Yugoslavia and Turkey would finally decide to join in a common effort against Germany. Greece, on the other hand, wished to avoid provoking a German attack and was resolved a) to prosecute the war in Albania unhindered by other campaigns, and b) not to abandon the fortified line in eastern Macedonia without a fight. Both considerations were put forward by the Greek military. In Albania the Greek army was unwilling to abandon an inch of territory to a defeated and despised enemy. In eastern Macedonia the military had built costly fortifications to keep Bulgaria at bay and were reluctant to abandon them for the unfortified line based on the Haliacmon river the British proposed. In view of these divergent views and objectives, and in the light of the inadequate forces the British were in a position to make available and the unresponsive attitude of Yugoslavia and Turkey, to reach agreement for military co-operation, in February first and again in March, required a great capacity for self-deception. What mattered at the time, however, was not what was left unsaid, but what was said for the world to hear. The military and political crisis of April 1941, which led to the capitulation of the Greek army to the Germans and the Italians, was not unconnected with these diverging views and objectives.